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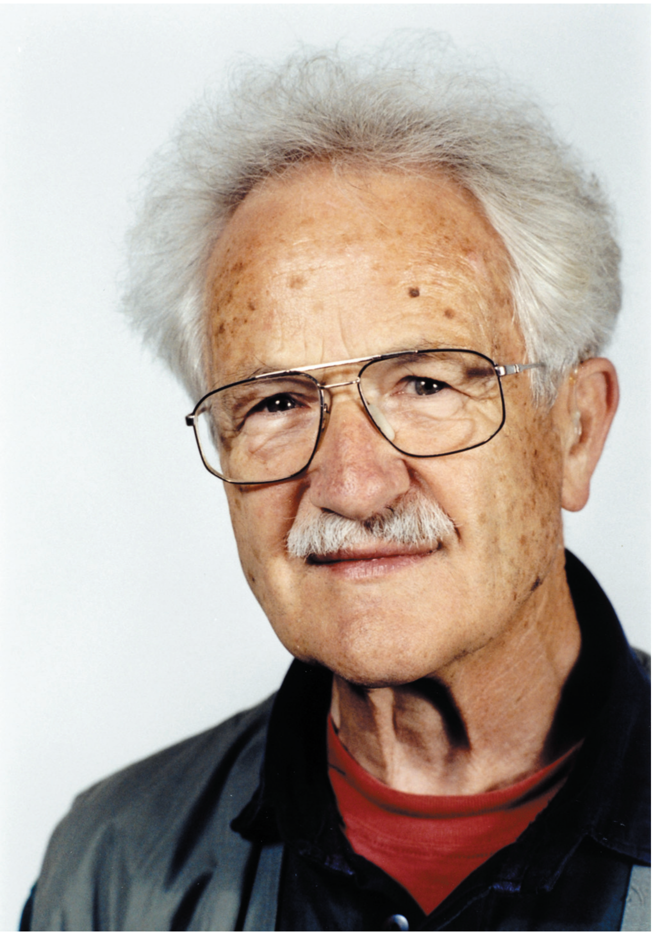
In memoriam Wilhelmus Albertus van Heel (1928–2008)

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On 27 November 2008 Dr WA (Willem) van Heel passed away in his sleep. In 1956 he entered the Rijksherbarium (later the Leiden University branch of the National Herbarium of the Netherlands, now section NHN of the Netherlands Centre for Biodiversity Naturalis) as Teaching Assistant. First he assisted in teaching plant systematics to undergraduate students. In 1958 he was appointed by HJ Lam to study androecium morphology in the Malvales, as a result of which he obtained his PhD in 1966. In the 'laudatio' at the ceremony CGGJ van Steenis praised his tenacity in exhausting the subject, his meticulous preparation work and the beautiful morphological reconstructions and drawings in the thesis. Thereafter he worked in several other plant groups, often in collaboration with colleague morphologists (pollen, wood) and taxonomists.

As soon as the scanning electron microscope became available as a research tool, he greedily made use of its full potential, extending his renowned preparation technique to complete series of early developmental stages of flowers. Impressive and convincing ontogenetic series of 3D photos were the 'tangible' result. Especially his publications on the development of carpels (Van Heel 1981, 1983, 1984) and on the development of septal nectaries (Van Heel 1988) are timeless and still regularly cited. His complete bibliography below demonstrates the wide taxonomic scope of his work. Whenever pollen grains showed up, he included them in his observations. When I joined the Comparative Morphology group of the Rijksherbarium in 1985 as pollen morphologist, Willem was one of the few in the institute with whom I could discuss pollen issues. This, and also our use of the same SEM facilities, laid the basis for a long-lasting friendship. His pioneer SEM work also attracted several visiting scientists to Leiden for floral developmental studies or to learn new SEM techniques. One of these visitors was our current director, Erik Smets, who established in Leuven a successful group with a major focus on floral ontogeny.



In the light of his hobbies, photography and water colour painting, it will not surprise anyone that Willem did not rest until his 'shots' could withstand artistic as well as scientific scrutiny. Many of them eventually were exposed in art galleries and exhibitions or were selected as de luxe postcards. The exposition 'Bloem dichtbij' ('close to flowers') in Galerie de Brasserie 'Hortus Wintertuin' at Leiden in 2005, where the most fascinating photos of flowers, ovaries, stamens, pollen, seeds and trichomes observed during his long career were shown, gave him much publicity and satisfaction. In an interview he remarked: "this is all sex".

In 1989 Willem accepted early retirement, together with his colleague PW Leenhouts, in order to create opportunities for some fresh blood in the staff of the institute (to which I owe my appointment). This did not mean that he left his office, the lab or the darkroom. As an honorary staff member he continued his research and although he spent many hours with his wife Ans in museums, exhibitions and the dunes, preferably on Wednesdays, he still was a frequent user of the scanning electron microscope. Besides, camping (not caravanning!) and birding remained favourite activities.

Everybody knew that by times he could grumble if things (or people) went wrong, but he seldom persisted in it. The only facts he could not stand were his deafness and his failing memory in the last years. From this period we remember him, accompanied by Ans, as a regular coffee-time-visitor with a list of things to do: getting literature, demineralised water, spirit for flower samples, questions about unknown plants (including ornamentals), and stories of remarkable flower structures. His last hot item was the flower of *Aristolochia arborea* mimicking a small mushroom (including the scent!) in its centre. We did not catch the message at once, but through a new version of his hobby, digital photography, he could immediately illustrate what it was all about: indeed a small white-stiped mushroom in a dark flower, standing there as a holy statue in a niche. I keep a box of golden SEM stubs with golden flower preparations by Willem as a token of his fascination by nature's patterns and jokes.

Dr. W.A. van Heel (photo by B.N. Kieft).

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compiled by CWJ Lut

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